Student Politics: Resistance, Refusal and Representation

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Neo-liberalism has become a ubiquitous term to define mainstream economic and political systems in the global north for over 40 years, in the context of the UK – despite shifts in the party which has led the government these parties have been driven by neo-liberalism and a similar observation can be offered toward a range of national contexts including the United States. As with any ubiquitous term, it has enjoyed extended application beyond perhaps its original intention and begins to lose the sharp edge of its definition. As such, we begin this section with a definition of neo-liberalism from David Harvey:

> *Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. (2005: 2)*

From Harvey's definition, neo-liberalism advocates rugged individualism, limited government/oversight and market forces. The principles of managerialism and private business principles now organise public institutions such as the health system or the judiciary. A result of managerialism, employees are required to account for their actions and justify their contribution through various metrics.

Traditionally, higher education has been seen as an autonomous institution, only loosely connected to macro institutions including the economy or politics. However, higher education has not escaped from the emergence and firm development of neo-liberalism throughout the global north (Naidoo and Williams, 2015; Saunders, 2010; Tavares and Cardoso, 2013; McCaig, 2018). Naidoo and Williams (2015) link the introduction of tuition fees in higher education systems as the origins of a neo-liberal higher education system and the development of students as consumers, this is they argue a similar case for the US in the 1970s and Australia in the late 1980s and then UK in late 1990s. Until recently, they continue that most Western European countries have had state supported HE systems. Now however, the change in funding structures for HEIs from state funded to primarily tuition fee led requires these institutions to be marketable and attract students to remain solvent. As Burke (2016) outlines, the introduction of tuition fees and the subsequent increase in fees, in the UK, were rationalised against the personal benefit over public good from a university education. This relationship between funding structures and a neo-liberal higher education system is coupled with the emergence and development of the knowledge economy (Tholen and Brown, 2018). Higher education has been increasingly associated with increasing potential for employability and life chances, echoing the narrative that individual drive provides "success". As a result, higher education provides the workforce required by the economy and is required to provide increasingly regulated skills and attributes to support the economy (Case, 2014) and by extension the neo-liberal system. Such a position is supported by increased student rationale for attending higher education being related to employment prospects (Purcell, *et al.,* 2012; Burke, 2016, Saunders, 2010).

A neo-liberal higher education system operates under the principles of managerialism and performativity, observed and evaluated through assumed objective metrics. In the UK context, Naidoo and Williams (2015) argue that there is a market *within* higher education, this is supported by a range of now taken for granted elements of higher education including Key Information Sets and various students survey reviewing both courses and university services - culminating in the National Student Survey. However, beyond how universities are organised and additional benefits and opportunities for students, curriculum is also driven and directed by market demands diluting the intellectual element of higher education in order to satisfy metrics (Naidoo and Williams, 2015; Saunders, 2010).

The impact of neo-liberal policies and practices on higher education staff has been well documented (Maisuria and Helmes, 2019; Mahony and Weiner, 2017). Stemming from performative expectations staff autonomy has been drastically reduced and replaced with strict metric driven tasks organised and observed through bureaucratic processes. Due to pressures in an increasingly unstable sector, higher education staff gradually become compliant in meeting these neo-liberal requirements (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004), at times maintained through bullying (Mausria, 2019; Mahony and Weiner, 2017). Turning to student impact from neo-liberalism, Naidoo and Williams (2015) reflect on previous research from Shumar examining the US context, Shumar suggests that via increased market practices in higher education a consumer persona replaces that of the scholar and meeting expectations supersedes intellectual development. Through this process, students become disconnected and passive toward larger debates within their university through a focus on their individual experience and the benefits that they gain through attending (Cardorso, 2012; Tavares and Cardorso, 2013). Higher education students adopt a consumer identity within the higher education system via early introduction to comparison information concerning courses based on metrics such as NSS and employment prospects, in the UK context. As such, students drive and push academic staff to meet neo-liberal metrics as they are the main source of information concerning the current student experience and potential student information. Students are now what Naidoo and Williams term "a competitive economic actor" (2015: 213), in other words students set the priorities of a once autonomous institution.

Students' political engagement in marketised universities

There is evidence to suggest that neoliberalisation of higher education and consumer culture have led to fragmentation of group loyalties and belonging which, in turn, has had an impact on students' political engagement. When discussing contemporary student politics, comparisons are often made with mid-20th century. Barker (2008) argues that student movements in 1960s and 1970s reflected in student protests against various institutional regulations and traditions, but also included student involvement in a variety of social movements such as the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements. This also made the student movement of the time more than a simple campus demonstration or representation of one's rights as a student (Raaper 2019). The most recent world-wide student demonstrations took place between 2009 and 2013 and were largely formed against increasing costs of higher education (Klemenčič, 2014). For example, the UK student demonstrations in 2010/11 were organised against the government plans to treble the tuition fees from £3000 to £9000 per year, and took place in the form of national

demonstrations and campus occupations (Hensby 2017). Similar protests were evident in other countries across the globe. Luescher-Mamasela (2013) and Altbach and Klemenčič (2014) suggest that these recent student movements provided an example how marketisation of education may have become the most significant mobilising force for contemporary student activism. However, we recognise that at the time of writing this chapter, there are a number of global protests taking place, e.g. in Chile as regards privatisation and rising inequalities; in Hong Kong on Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill or global climate strikes which all include students and relate to motives beyond the immediate university related matters. These examples deserve scholarly attention in the nearer future.

It could also be argued that changes in student demographics (e.g. diversity in social and ethnic background) can further affect the nature of student politics; this is particularly as more diverse student population can make it difficult for collective student identity to be developed for political activism (Klemenčič 2014). Klemenčič (2015) suggests that not only has the understanding of politics changed but the concept of studentship has become more varied among students with different backgrounds. It may be that we have entered an era of more personalised politics where lifestyle choices and identity formation have become the key focus (Wright and Raaper 2019). While it is difficult to encapsulate what counts as student politics in contemporary society and university campuses where a number of identity-based groups and associations has significantly increased, there is evidence to suggest that the role of students' unions is in a process of change. Some would argue (Luescher-Mamasela 2013) that their primary role is to safeguard the student as consumer interest. Students' unions have also become important stakeholders at national and institutional policy levels, advising governments and universities on how to improve student experience (Wright and Raaper 2019). Research has shown that there are now closer relationships between students' unions and senior university management, and a tendency to employ an increasing number of professional employees and advisers to students' unions (Brooks et al 2016, 2015). This approach to students' unions as key stakeholders in higher education governance allows universities and the sector more broadly to demonstrate that student voice and satisfaction are being taken seriously and acted upon (Brooks et al 2015). However, this also means that the role of student collectives in mobilising students for wider political causes has been weakened and their practices have been more closely aligned with the interests of the university management (Nissen and Hayward 2017). It is also known that students from minority backgrounds, those not living on campus or who work part-time are least likely to take part in activities provided by students' unions (NUS 2012, 2013). This raises questions about representativeness of students' unions and whose interest they protect. It is also known that sabbatical offices from students' unions tend to have their own priorities that may differ from wider student population, and when they sit on university governance structures (e.g. university senate or council in the UK), they may not have a full mandate to negotiate on behalf of an increasingly diverse and complex student body (Wright and Raaper 2019).

While there is evidence to suggest that there has been a shift from collective student movement to more professionalised and individualised practices (Raaper 2019), it is difficult to encapsulate how exactly students develop their political identity and practices in marketised higher education settings. It is known that students are significantly affected by

high tuition fees and student debt which have an impact on their wellbeing and capacity to participate in university life and political/student communities (Nissen 2019). Furthermore, recent research has shown (e.g. Nissen 2019; Raaper 2018; 2019) that many students in England and New Zealand have become more professional in their approaches to political engagement (e.g. using lobbying politicians and professional advice from students' unions) and they also adopt safer and less controversial practices to make their views heard.

Power and Resistance: the role of social theory

A thread running through contemporary social theory is its concern with power and conditions required for emancipation and resistance toward the reproduction of the dominant privileged group however that group is understood to be comprised. When reflecting on power and resistance we began our thinking with Steven Lukes' (1974) essay *Power: A Radical View*, here Lukes argues that power has many faces or layers with the most potent face of power being when power is seen to be natural, acceptable and beneficial to both the powerful and the powerless. When power is both ubiquitous and invisible, this begs the question of how can such conditions be resisted? As with other taken-for-granted or "natural" conditions of social space, social theory provides us with the language or the gaze to critically and reflexivity examine power relations and opportunities for resistance. In this spirit, we provide some short reflections on the theoretical contributions from leading theorists on power and resistance. This is by no means an exhaustive list, indeed we could have chosen a completely different set of theorists however we feel that these theorists compliment the subsequent chapters by our contributing authors and approach power from both a macro and micro perspective and similarly resistance on a personal and collective level.

From an Arendtian perspective, student politics (*as resistance to neoliberalisation of higher education*) could be viewed in a rather normative way where 'acting in concert' equates with power (Arendt 1958, 245). For Arendt, power is therefore a manifestation of freedom. Arendt distinguished in her book *The Human Condition* (1958) three core human activities – labour, work and action – from which the latter is the highest level of three activities through which we disclose ourselves to others. Political action (*as resistance*) is therefore a superior human condition but also very difficult, requiring certain kinds of conditions, e.g. a readiness to take initiative and start something new and unpredictable (Arendt 1958). Action also takes place in relationship with others (Arendt 1968), and is irreversible, therefore requiring significant courage and risk-taking (Arendt 1970). Throughout her works, Arendt emphasised the importance of collectiveness and interaction in the operation of power and resistance; she argued that power 'is simply non-existent unless it can rely on others' (Arendt 1963, 230). In neoliberal higher education contexts where university studies are costly and increasingly individualised, competitive and employment-oriented, it is uncertain to what extent students are able to take risks and mediate unpredictability associated with action. Therefore, an Arendtian theorisation might help us explore the claims around depolitisation of contemporary students and the potential lack for collective student resistance.

At the centre of Bourdieu's theoretical project sits power, the extent to which it is reproduced, the avenues which we pursue to illustrate distinction and legitimacy and the complicity of those without power in the reproduction of their conditions and circumstance. For Bourdieu, power is both covert and overt, sewn together by a foundation micro-processes of tastes, culture, attitudes, accents etc. bestowing power on those who demonstrate "fit" and authority. Fundamental to power is the processes which allows it to be taken-for-granted or "how things are", in the face of blatant reproduction and inequality. Bourdieu describes neo-liberalism as "a programme of methodical destruction of collectives" (1998: 95-96). Neo-liberalism, he continues, is an active pursuit of an economic and political ideology, it is as Bourdieu describes a "strong discourse" (1998: 95) and one which is reinforced and armed by those who benefit from de-regulation and individualism: the powerful and the privileged. In addition to the support of those it secures, neo-liberalism also relies on the complicity of those it abuses. This paradoxical process comes about, Bourdieu suggests, as a consequence of an increasingly deregulated and destabilised labour market where adherence to the system is required to maintain survival. We would argue that alongside passive permission, neo-liberalism is reinforced via the misrecognition of doxic relations within a field or fields. As such, power is maintained through the combination of symbolic violence of the individual/group and the threat of abandonment from the system which is at once punitive but also deemed necessary. Reflecting on Arendt's position that resistance is irreversible, without a suitable and viable alternative, resistance will be limited and judged on a range of factors beyond the reaction to injustice and inequality.

Resistance to such neo-liberal practices within higher education and beyond is diluted through the act of resistance being interpreted as old-fashioned and self-serving directed by an unwillingness to accept change and progress (Bourdieu, 1998). As such neo-liberalism becomes and norm and an influential environment in constructing and reinforcing the habitus. As a consequence, resistance is dealt a further blow as dissent from the collective habitus is not only mistrusted but actively fought against for the greater good of the collective and interests of the individual (Bourdieu, 1966). However, this does not mean that resistance is futile but does require a concerted effort, as Bourdieu argues "habitus is not eternal" (1992: 130). The habitus is both constructed and maintained through a range of factors including environment, for a habitus to shift perspective a new environment is therefore required (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Here Bourdieu maintains the need for "subversion orientated towards conservation or restoration" (1998: 104), an endeavour which will be realised through collective engagement and collective action.

The final theorist we wish to discuss concerning collective resistance is Habermas. A primary concern for Habermas' work was to provide an understanding of power relations and processes within an increasingly complex social space and reaffirm the reflexive and democratic principles of the enlightenment. Habermas argues that contemporary social space operates simultaneously between the two layers of the system and the life world (1979, 1984, 1989), however this is a fractious coupling where the social and cultural values of the life-world can often be contradictory to the system imperatives resulting in conflict and the system exerting power over the life-world. As a result, the advanced capitalist and neo-liberal system imperatives blur into and colonise the life-world remaking culture and agency in the individualistic and atomic image of the economic and political system.

Habermas echoing Bourdieu, attributes the reproduction of power and inequality through the slow inculcation of advanced modern ideologies such as neo-liberalism to individuals' distraction and preoccupation with cultural consumption and superficial causes. In this context, power is reproduced through collective inertia and acceptance of the status quo through what Marcuse (1964) would describe as a "one dimensional" society.

For Habermas, a central institution for the protection and advancement of democracy and critical engagement with the reproduction of power is the public sphere (1992). Directed by the principles of an "ideal speech situation", the public sphere is a site of reflection and debate providing an opportunity to reinforced life world values and push back the instruments and mechanisms of the system. The public sphere provides a means of resistance by creating an epistemological break with a taken for granted system, "in the salons the mind was no longer in the service of a patron; "opinion" became emancipated from the bond of economic dependence' (Habermas, 1992: 33). Here Habermas provides us with the blueprints to consider the institutional support required to reinforce the life-world and resist encroaching neoliberal policies. For Habermas, as is true for Arendt and Bourdieu, resistance comes from collective debate and collective action.

An alternative view of power and resistance comes through Foucauldian social theory. Power for Foucault is always present, and it exists 'in the whole network of the social' (Foucault 1982, 345). This also means that from a Foucauldian perspective all human relationships – both social and private relations - are part of relationships of power (Foucault 1983), and therefore always political (Franek 2014). Furthermore, power can be 'at once visible and invisible, present and hidden, ubiquitous' (Foucault and Deleuze 1977, 213). It is not necessarily negative, but power can be productive even if sometimes risky or dangerous. It could therefore be argued that a Foucauldian perspective of power might offer a helpful alternative to explore more subtle and identity-related forms of resistance and political action compared to the collective form discussed previously. From a Foucauldian perspective, any action/resistance needs to be viewed in relation to the discursive production of certain type of (political) subjects. It is a political subjectivity that becomes a precondition for agency (Allen 2002; Raaper 2019). We would therefore suggest that as market discourses dominate most Western higher education sectors, it can also be assumed that resistance will take place within and in response to such discourses. From a Foucauldian perspective, it would also be important to question the role of the technologies of the self (1984), and the importance of resisting oneself and who one has become to defend political and societal change. In other words, Foucault could potentially help us to understand the role of micro level resistance in contemporary student politics.

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